

The Farm Bill: An Intersection of Farm Policy and Welfare Reforms

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Today Congress will begin the process of reauthorizing the farm bill which expires September 30, 2018. The House Agriculture Committee takes the first step this morning with a markup of H.R. 2, the "Agriculture & Nutrition Act of 2018". With over 10 million acres of farmland and a variety of commodities in the state, the agribusiness community in Georgia is sure to be paying attention. Indeed, the annual Farm Gate Value for Georgia's agricultural production is over \$13 billion, with commodities like broilers, cotton, chicken eggs, vegetables, peanuts, and fruit leading the way.

House Agriculture Committee Chairman Mike Conaway (R-Texas) states the farm bill is budget neutral. It would cut about \$1.5 billion during the five-year reauthorization across titles like conservation, rural energy development, and crop insurance, all the while boosting funding for others like nutrition programs and commodity support.

One of the changes included in H.R. 2 is the phase out of the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) by rolling parts of it into the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Both of these programs fund conservation practices on

working lands. Chairman Conaway feels that EQIP is better suited for addressing local natural resource concerns such as the promotion of healthy soils, reduction of erosion, enhancement of wildlife/wildlife habitat, and providing for cleaner air and water.

Another change included in the House farm bill is within the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), which pays farmers to take erodible and environmentally sensitive land out of production for a period of time. Under H.R. 2, the total acreage cap would be expanded to 29 million acres, up from 24 million. To accommodate this increase, payment rates would be reduced to 80 percent of the current rate. In addition, the acreage would be targeted towards the most fragile lands.

Probably the most highlighted section of the farm bill is the nutrition title which includes the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or more commonly known as the Food Stamp Program. A majority of Congressional Republicans have been looking to reform this program for quite some time. Chairman Conaway states the changes to SNAP maintain and strengthen this national nutritional program that assists those low-income households which need help to pay for the cost of food. H.R. 2 requires that work capable adults (ages 18-59) work or participate in work training for 20 hours per week. Those populations who are exempted from this requirement are seniors, disabled, those caring for children under six, or those who are pregnant. The bill also modifies eligibility rules so that people may qualify for SNAP based on their eligibility for and receipt of benefits from other low-income assistance programs. Currently, there is over 1.5 million people on Georgia's SNAP program which could be affected by these provisions, depending on their status.

Other provisions included in H.R. 2 streamline and reduce regulatory burdens across the different titles of the farm bill, including the consolidation of a number of trade programs under the International Market Development Program; strengthening of commodity programs like Price Loss Coverage and Agriculture Risk Coverage; and, improvement of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) consultation process regarding pesticide registration activities to ensure agricultural producers have access to the safest and most efficient modern crop protection tools.

The possibility of a quick and easy farm bill reauthorization appears unlikely. The Senate Agriculture Committee has yet to release its version of a farm bill reauthorization, which will need the support of Democrats in order to pass on the Senate floor. House Democrats have expressed concerns that the bill's work requirement would limit access to SNAP benefits and create burdensome administrative requirements. And, a group of House conservatives are also withholding support at this time. Yep, just another day in Washington.